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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000313

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS - M. COPPOLA
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: SINGAPORE TIGHTENS CONTROLS ON PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES

REF: 08 SINGAPORE 937

Classified By: CDA Daniel Shields for reason 1.4(d)

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) Summary: Apparently in preparation for Singapore's hosting of the APEC Leaders Meeting this year, the government submitted a new Public Order Bill to Parliament on March 23, to be debated in mid-April. The bill proposes a new regulatory scheme for public assemblies and processions, new "move on" powers for the police, and new security rules for special events. An assembly or procession in a public place will require a police permit, even if it involves just one person. Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong (protect) called this a "Chee Soon Juan" law aimed at stopping the Singapore Democratic Party leader or other activists from staging small-scale demonstrations that are not clearly prohibited by the existing law, which bans public assemblies of five or more persons without a permit. The police will receive broad new powers to issue "move on" orders and will be able to prohibit the filming of law enforcement activities. The Minister for Home Affairs will acquire a new power to designate "special events," such as those at risk for terrorism, requiring heightened security measures. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Singapore's Constitution guarantees citizens the right to assemble peaceably but also allows Parliament to infringe that right for the sake of security or public order. Although the GOS pays lip service to the right of assembly, the Public Order Bill will entrench the government's power to ban public demonstrations by defining even one-person events as "public assemblies." The police's new powers will allow them to order people arbitrarily out of public places, and the bill also seems to target the practice of citizens filming arrests for later posting on YouTube. The immediate goal is apparently to shut down, before they can begin, any potential demonstrations around events like the upcoming APEC Leaders Meeting. The Public Order Bill expands the GOS's already sweeping powers to infringe the constitutional rights of citizens in the name of public order, with no genuine accountability for public officials' use or abuse of those powers. In doing so, it showcases the GOS's obsessive need to control conduct that poses even a trivial threat to public order - or to the long hegemony of the ruling party. End Comment.

Government Submits New Public Order Bill to Parliament

¶3. (U) The GOS submitted a new Public Order Bill to Parliament on March 23. The proposed law will do three things: (i) replace the existing law governing public assemblies and processions with a new and, in some ways, more restrictive permit scheme; (ii) give police new "move along"

powers and the authority to prohibit filming of law enforcement activity; and (iii) enable the Minister for Home Affairs to invoke more stringent security rules during "special events," such as Singapore's hosting of APEC meetings throughout 2009. Parliament will debate the Public Order Bill at its next sitting, which is due to begin April 113.

Motives: APEC, Terrorism - and Those Annoying Protesters

14. (U) Previewing the Public Order Bill earlier this year, Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng assured the local press that the legislation would be in place for the APEC Leaders Meeting in November. Wong cited past public protests by Falun Gong members and Burmese dissidents in Singapore and told journalists, "They make a show of breaking the law; the police watch and do nothing and can only follow up with investigation after the show is over when they pack up and leave. This cannot go on." He added that Singapore's current "piecemeal" public order laws were not designed for today's world of "suicide bombers and anarchistic fanatics."

One-Person Public "Assemblies": A Threat to Public Order?

15. (U) The Public Order Bill requires a police permit for any public assembly or procession intended to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person, group, or government, to publicize a cause or campaign, or to mark or commemorate any event. The bill defines a public assembly or procession to include events

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staged by one or more persons. This is a substantial change from the existing rules, which apply to assemblies or processions of five or more persons. Those who organize or participate in a public assembly or procession without a permit will incur substantial fines, and repeat offenses by organizers will be punishable by up to six months in prison. The Home Affairs minister will be able to designate certain public places as "unrestricted," and therefore exempt from the permit requirement, and others as "prohibited," for which permits will not be available without a special exemption. The bill's explanatory statement signals that the existing Speakers' Corner (see reftel) will be designated an "unrestricted" area.

16. (C) Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong (protect), an independent who is often critical of policies favored by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), told PolOff this is a "Chee Soon Juan" law designed to criminalize small public demonstrations or marches by the Singapore Democratic Party leader or other activists. The existing law, which bans only assemblies or processions by five or more persons, cannot be used against one- or two-person protests. Siew plans to speak against the new bill in debate and to cast a symbolic "nay" vote when the PAP-dominated Parliament passes it.

Move On . . . and Put Away That Camera!

17. (SBU) The Public Order Bill gives the police broad powers over public spaces. The police may order a person to leave a public place and not return for up to 24 hours if the police "reasonably suspect" that the person is interfering with a trade or business, being disorderly or offensive to others, disrupting the conduct of an event, or committing or "just about to commit" an offense. (Note: The "move on" provisions appear to be based closely on similar rules adopted by the Australian state of Queensland in 2006. End Note.) The bill also authorizes the police to prohibit filming of law enforcement activities, if the police believe that the filming prejudices a law enforcement operation or endangers the safety of an officer. (Comment: These

conditions seem unlikely to restrain the police from using the power indiscriminately in practice. End Comment) The police will also be able to search persons and premises for such films and seize the films, all without warrant. Failure to obey a police "move on" order, or an order to stop filming law enforcement activities or to surrender a film already made, will subject the offender to a fine up to S\$20,000 (US\$13,333) and up to a year in prison.

New Security Rules for "Special Events"

18. (U) The final innovation of the Public Order Bill is its section on "Special Events Security." The Minister for Home Affairs will be able to declare an event a "special event" based on the potential for disruption, the need to protect attendees, or the risk of terrorism. The declaration will trigger police powers to control public entry into and exit from the event area, conduct security screenings, inspect personal property, and confiscate prohibited items. Although the GOS has not yet indicated how it will use these powers, they appear likely to come into play for large public events like the Formula One Grand Prix in September or high-profile official events like the APEC Leaders Meeting.

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